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U.S. Churches Fail to Narrow Gap Between 'Believing' and 'Belonging'

PRINCETON, N.J. — In the decade since 1978, the churches of America have made no headway in narrowing the gap between religious belief and church involvement — between "believers" and "belongers."

This is one of the key findings to emerge from a just-completed major survey, *The Unchurched American, 1988*, which explored and compared the religious beliefs, practices, values, and lifestyles of the churched and unchurched. This $163,000 study of 2,556 adults, 18 and older, is a 10-year update of a landmark survey conducted by The Gallup Organization a decade ago, *The Unchurched American, 1978*.

The current survey was conducted for CONGRESS 88, a National Festival of Evangelism, to be held in Chicago Aug. 4-7, and was underwritten by 24 Protestant and Catholic religious groups or denominations. Blacks and Hispanics in the 1988 survey were oversampled in order to provide the first in-depth look ever at the churched and unchurched among these two groups.

Both studies defined Americans as "unchurched" if they were not members of a church or had not attended services in the previous six months other than for special religious holidays, weddings, funerals or the like. In the 1978 survey, 41% of adults, 18 and older, were classified as "unchurched," which projected to approximately 61 million adults. This projection was based on an estimate by the U.S. Department of Labor (Bureau of Labor Statistics) of the total adult civilian non-institutionalized population. The estimate was 150,116,000.

In the 1988 survey, 44% of adults are "unchurched," which projects to approximately 78 million adults, based on a May 1988 population estimate of 177,007,000.

Trend in Attitudes Parallels Behavior

Consistent with the findings on church behavior over the last decade are the views of the public on whether a person can be a good Christian or Jew if he or she does not attend church or synagogue. Today, 76% hold this view, statistically the same as the figure recorded in the 1978 survey (78%).

In addition, the percentage who believe that "one should arrive at his or her religious beliefs independent of any church or synagogue" remains statistically the same today (80%) as in 1978 (81%). On other issues, religious institutions get decidedly worse grades today than a decade ago. The percentage of Americans, for example, who believe that "most churches and synagogues today are too concerned with organizational, as opposed to theological or spiritual issues," has grown from 51% to 59%, while the percentage of those saying "most churches today are not concerned enough about social justice" has increased from 35% to 41%.

But Belief, Commitment Rising

While the number of "belongers" has declined since the 1978 survey, the number of "believers" (among Christians) has grown. Since 1978 the percentage of adults who believe Jesus Christ to be God or the Son of God has increased from 78% to 84%, and the percentage of those who say they have made a "commitment to Jesus Christ" has increased from 60% to 66%.

While these changes are modest, they are significant because levels of belief and commitment, Gallup trend surveys have shown, tend to change at a very slow rate.

Churches Have Done Well to Hold Ground

A comparison of the 1978 and 1988 surveys shows that churches, as a whole, have not made any headway to date in bringing believers into (or back into) the community of active worshippers. At the same time, however, one might maintain that churches have done well to keep slippage at a minimum in view of the continued high mobility among Americans during the last decade, the distractions of modern life, and the apparent growing appeal of cults and non-traditional religious movements. The Church, or organized religion, for example, continues to generate greater confidence among the public than any of the other key institutions of our society.

Alcoholism Widely Viewed as a Disease But Opinion Diverges on Root Causes

Though the overwhelming majority of Americans agree generally that alcoholism is a disease, they divide markedly over what precise definition applies to the condition.

In December, a Gallup Poll found 88% agreeing with the statement, "alcoholism is a disease," while 11% disagreed. The level of agreement has risen from 79% in 1982 and reflects no significant differences among demographic groups.

The increase indicates the significant headway made by the "disease" concept in persuading the public of the underlying nature of alcholism. The growing acceptance of the concept represents a sharp turn away from the nearly total emphasis in the past on moral weakness and character defects as principal causes.

But a new Gallup survey indicates that the exact meaning of "disease" remains unclear in the public mind and that the transition to such concepts is far from complete.

Asked which of a number of options describe their feeling about alcoholism, 60% say it is a disease or illness, 31% a mental or psychological problem, 23% a lack of will power, 16% a moral weakness, and 6% are unsure.

The survey reveals substantial variations by sex, age, and education. Women are more likely than men (65% vs. 54%), to choose the disease definition, college graduates more likely than those whose formal education ended before graduation from high school (68% vs. 49%), and 18-to-29-year-olds more likely than those 50 and older (64% vs. 53%).

The debate over the underlying causes of alcoholism was heightened by the recent 4-to-3 Supreme Court ruling that alcoholic veterans can be denied certain benefits on the grounds that they are at least partly responsible for their condition. The Court, however, stressed that its ruling did not address the broader question of whether alcoholism is a disease.

The Random House Dictionary of the English Language defines a disease as "a condition of the body in which there is incorrect function resulting from the effect of heredity, infection, diet, or environment."

Here is the question:

Which of the following describes how you feel about alcoholism: A moral weakness? A lack of will power? A disease or illness? A mental or psychological problem?

The public's definitions of alcoholism are based on telephone interviews with 1,003 adults, 18 and older, conducted in scientifically selected localities across the nation March 8-12. The perceptions of alcoholism as a disease are based on a similar survey of 707 adults conducted Dec. 18-19, 1987.

THIRD OF AMERICANS SAY GRACE BEFORE MEALS 'ALWAYS' OR 'FREQUENTLY'

One-third of American adults (34%) say they "always" (21%) or "frequently" (13%) say grace at family meals at home, while another 27% say they occasionally do so. Thirty-seven percent say they never do so.

The question and results:

At family meals at home, does someone say grace or give thanks to God aloud before meals?

Grace Before Meals?

	NATIONAL
Yes, always	21%
Yes, frequently	13
Yes, occasionally	27
No	37
Don't know	2
	100%

The results are based on a telephone survey of 513 adults, nationwide interviewed in April.

49% of Canadians Say Religion Is 'Relevant Part of Life'

The percentage of Canadians who say organized religion is a relevant part of their lives has grown since 1984, and is now closer to the level recorded in 1978.

Here is the question:

Is organized religion a relevant part of your life at the present time, or not?

National results show 49% currently feel religion is a relevant part of their life. This is just slightly under the 52% who felt this way ten years ago, but well above the 44% who did so in 1984.

Today, 44% of Protestants and 64% of Roman Catholics attest to the relevancy of religion in their lives.

As the following table shows, Eastern Canadians hold more religious conviction than do those in the West; women more so than men, and older Canadians far more than those under thirty years of age.

The table below compares sub-groups of the Canadian population with the national results today, and in 1984 and 1978.

Is Organized Religion A Relevant Part of Life?

	Percent 'Yes'		
	1988 %	1984 %	1978 %
NATIONAL	49	44	52
Atlantic	60	51	60
Quebec	60	62	66
Ontario	51	38	50
Prairies	41	37	36
British Columbia	25	23	37
Men	46	39	46
Women	52	48	58
18 to 29 years	37	33	38
30 to 49 years	47	43	52
50 years and older	62	54	62

Details of Survey

The results reported above are based on 1,024 personal, interviews with adults, 18 years and over, conducted between May 4-7. A sample of this size is accurate within a four percentage point margin, 19 in 20 times.

Church Attendance Among Canadians Steady at 32 Percent

Canadian church attendance is at a 32% level, down three percentage points from a year earlier, but slightly up from the level recorded in 1986.

In 1957, when this question was first asked of Canadians, 60% reported attendance at church or synagogue in the past week. This proportion had dropped to 44% in 1970, and to 41% in 1975. But between 1980 and 1984, there was little or no change, with about 36% reporting attendance.

Most of the change in 1985 and 1986 came from a decline in Roman Catholic attendance, but with a 46% attendance level last year, and a 42% today, this decline may be arrested.

Among Protestants, attendance appears to have declined marginally to a 26% level today compared with 30% a year ago.

The following table shows results of this question today, and in earlier years:

Did you, yourself, happen to attend church or synagogue in the last seven days?

	Percent Attending Church/Synagogue		
	National	Roman Catholics	Protestants
	%	%	%
1988	32	42	26
1987	35	46	30
1986	31	40	28
1985	32	43	29
1984	36	50	29
1983	35	51	27
1982	35	48	27
1981	37	51	29
1980	35	50	26
1975	41	61	25
1970	44	65	28
1965	55	83	32
1957	60	87	43

The results reported above are based on 1,024 personal interviews with adults, 18 years and over, conducted between May 4-7, 1988. A sample of this size is accurate within a four percentage point margin, 19 in 20 times.

3 in 4 Among British Clergy Believe in Virgin Birth

Almost three in four (73%) of clergymen in Great Britain believe that it is a historical fact that Christ was born of a Virgin and only 17% disagree with this view. Among "middle of the road" clergymen who comprise the largest single group (38%), a significant minority — about one in three — claim that it was not a historical fact that Christ was born of a Virgin.

Similarly, three in four (75%) clergymen believe that Jesus was raised bodily from the dead and only 15% subscribe to the view that Jesus was not raised bodily from the dead, with the remainder of the clergy being unsure or claiming "neither." However, among the clergymen who classify themselves as "middle of the road," more than a quarter claim that Jesus was not raised bodily from the dead.

These findings are based on a Gallup telephone survey of 309 full-time Church of England clergymen between December 17-21, 1987, randomly selected from Crockfords Directory.

The Gallup Study of Teen-Age Attitudes And Behavior Concerning Religion

Teen-agers have always asked questions about religion. Today's generation of teen-agers now must also ask about TV ministers, the New Age movement, charismatic movements, the separation of Church and state, and a host of other issues given prominent treatment by the press.

At the same time, religious leaders, educators and parents are asking about the relevancy of religious training in helping teens to acquire social and civic values, and to combat the threats of substance abuse, sexual irresponsibility, and social anomie.

Through the Gallup Youth Survey, we seek to understand the world of teen-agers. We are now developing a study plan which will provide insights into the understanding of the spiritual needs and development of teen-agers. This plan is now being offered on a subscription basis to the nation's denominations. It is our hope that the study can be funded by a wide range of interests so that its results will have wide impact.

The study will consist of relevant questions posed to a nationwide sample of teen-agers, ages 13 through 17. These of course are the critical years when young people first begin to reason and to form the values they will carry into adulthood.

The objectives of the study will be to develop an understanding of the teen-ager's:

- Religious service attendance and the factors influencing attendance
- Past and current religious education
- Religious youth group participation
- Other church-related activities
- Bible study and beliefs
- Prayer and meditation
- Use of religious electronic media
- Parental influence on religious beliefs
- Peer influences
- Religious leader influences
- Youth leader influences
- Opinions of the relevancy of organized religion
- The effect of religious involvement upon civic, social, and ethical behavior
- Interest in religion as a vocation
- Interest in attending a church-affilated college
- Basic beliefs
- Interest in cults, the New Age movement, non-Judaic-Christian religion

If you think you or your denomination might be interested in becoming a sponsor of this study, please write:

Mr. Robert Bezilla
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The Gallup Organization, Inc.
53 Bank Street
Princeton, NJ 08542
Telephone: (609) 924-9600

How To Reach The Unchurched American

Millions of Americans remain unchurched, and many churches are continuing to experience losses in membership. What can be done to reach the unchurched American? How can present members be kept in the fold?

New light is shed on these pressing questions by the results of a just-completed major survey of the nation's adults, THE UNCHURCHED AMERICAN — 1988. The focus of this survey is on the factors that cause people to leave the church — and those that cause them to return.

This survey, which reports updates of many of the questions asked in the landmark survey of a decade ago (THE UNCHURCHED AMERICAN, 1978), compares and contrasts the attitudes of the churched and unchurched on social changes, lifestyle factors, basic religious beliefs and many other factors that are related to churchlessness.

Special attention in this 1988 survey has been given to the religious experience and needs of blacks and Hispanics in the United States.

The report, based on this important survey, provides full statistical details, comparisons with 1978 results, as well as a special section which offers practical steps to reach the unchurched in your community.

For good, solid, practical information that can help YOU in YOUR ministry — both in reaching new people and in deepening the commitment of the present members of your church — write for the new report, THE UNCHURCHED AMERICAN — 1988.

To place your order write: The Princeton Religion Research Center, P.O. Box 628, Princeton, NJ 08542. Cost per copy is $29.00.

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